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ABSTRACT

Reflecting and influencing foreign policy, the mass media are important, if nontraditional, diplomatic channels. The role the news media assume, ranging from neutral to participant, depends largely on the society within which it operates. Journalists in authoritarian governments, for example, who rely on press releases and briefings of foreign policy makers, reflect rather than analyze official diplomatic positions. Serving as policy instruments, they generate little tension between the press and diplomatic circles. In more liberal societies, however, journalists tend to adopt an adversary role. They advocate or criticize foreign policy, bringing public opinion to bear on government stands. As diplomatic control over the message and target audience decreases, therefore, tension between the press and official diplomatic channels grows. Given its potential impact, more research is needed on the press's role in foreign relations. (MM)

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News Media and Diplomacy:

Roles, Relationships and Communication Systems

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News Media and Diplomacy:

Roles, Relationships and Communication Systems

In the perennial debate over the performance and ethics of the mass news media, a long-standing theme is that of press responsibility (or irresponsibility) in international relations. By whatever reasoning, critics conclude that the press could do a better job of advancing global knowledge and understanding. Evidence of the currency, universality and controversy of such concerns includes UNESCO's "Declaration on Fundamental Principles Concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racialism, Apartheid and Incitement to War," adopted at the 1978 General Conference.

Implicit in such concerns is the assumption that news media have a discernible impact on foreign policy and are thus actors in the process of diplomacy. The news media's roles and relationships in this domain have rarely been qualified, however. This study will identify various diplomatic roles the news media play, and discuss conditions and circumstances that foster a particular media role in diplomatic communication. (The terms "news media," "press" and "journalism" are used interchangeably here to encompass news reporting, interpretation and commentary by newspapers, news magazines, radio, television and the news agencies that inform them.)

While foreign affairs has long been a staple of press coverage, widespread concerns about the news media as autonomous diplomatic actors have emerged alongside the concept of "public diplomacy" (or "new diplomacy"). Public diplomacy derives from the Wilsonian ideal of "open treaties, openly arrived at," challenging the traditional concept of diplomacy based on secret, interpersonal communications between plenipotentiaries. Since the end of World

War I, foreign affairs officials, journalists and scholars have increasingly accepted the reality that new information technologies, new politics and new concerns for human survival have defined a new diplomacy that relies on open, closed, formal and informal communications among official and unofficial actors.

In its "public" guise, diplomacy has come to mean almost all contacts between countries, with the assumption that such contacts ultimately affect the climate for foreign policy making, if not policy itself. This study, however, will limit use of the terms "diplomacy" and "diplomatic" to foreign policy activities in which officials are actively engaged in pursuing specific objectives. As such, they may be original sources for diplomatic messages or react to "public" reports and commentary on diplomatic situations. As Wedge (1968) writes:

> What has been called the "new diplomacy" recognizes the diffusion of the decision process and applies broader criteria to the process of negotiation, tending to consider each of the channels of communication as a legitimate area for diplomatic endeavor (p. 28).

Public opinion--domestic and foreign, neutral, friendly or hostile--thus becomes a major concern of policy makers. Publics as well as governments and a host of "experts" send and receive verbal and nonverbal messages that redound to relationships among states. Foremost among "nontraditional" diplomatic channels are the mass news media.

This is not to suggest that diplomacy and journalism are always compatible or complementary, however. Despite widespread public acceptance and support for public diplomacy, evidence suggests that career diplomats prefer the traditional, closed channels, particularly when negotiating specific issues for specific objectives. Russett & Starr (1981) note that the communication function is central to diplomacy and that many diplomatic trappings have evolved

"to maintain and facilitate communications and to reduce the sources of misunderstanding and distortion in interstate communication" (p. 161). Further, according to Wedge (1968), "In the practice of classic diplomacy, diplomats tend to acquire a common culture. They become more like each other than are the countries they represent" (p. 27). Thus, when diplomatic language and other symbols constitute a code to which nondiplomats are not privy, outsiders may distort the intended meaning of diplomatic messages. When the news media, with their worldwide penetration, disseminate such distortions, a certain amount of semantic noise is injected into the original diplomatic message, which may even be rendered dysfunctional.

It is hardly surprising, then, that "official" diplomats prefer to conduct critical negotiations in closed, interpersonal encounters, while they rely on the channels of public diplomacy in attempting to create a general environment favorable to advancing their interests and objectives. At both levels, however, the foreign affairs official strives to be in control of the communication process. Tensions between officials and the press develop when the diplomat loses that sense of control over the news media as a channel for diplomatic communication.

In his signal study of American foreign policy makers and journalists, Cohen (1963) notes repeatedly that in a democracy, especially, there are tensions between the two (and little official enthusiasm for "uncontrolled" public diplomacy):

> The official wants the press to serve his interpretation of the government's interest--to publish his version of reality where publication promises a good return, and to refrain from publication whenever the official has any doubts about the wisdom or propriety of disclosure, or even its convenience, since the larger the circle of interest, the greater the number of people who want to share in the policy decision. But the journalist generally believes that the national interest, whatever it may

> be, is best served by maximum disclosure, by full freedom of information, and he wants to exercise his own judgment, to publish his own interpretation or version of the reality that he thinks is important or newsworthy while it is still fresh and new (p. 266).

Tensions between diplomacy and the press occur when their views of the sociopolitical role of the press diverge. The amount of tension in the relationship between diplomacy and the press depends on a combination of three factors:

1. the political system(s) in which the two operate;
2. the degree of openness (from secret to public) that officials seek to maintain in the diplomatic situation;
3. the degree of involvement (from neutral observer to active participant) that the press seeks to achieve in the diplomatic situation.

Wiio's (1977) model of open and closed communication systems adapts to provide a social communication framework in which these factors interact. The matrix at Figure 1 represents the relatively open and closed communication subsystems that coexist within a single sociopolitical system, regardless of its predominant ideology (i.e., liberal, authoritarian, totalitarian). Depending on the communicators and the communication function involved, specific types or instances of communication will be more or less open in regard to the accessibility, intelligibility or value of the message and the size and composition of its intended audience.

Given foreign policy officials' interest in controlling diplomatic communication, they will attempt to limit the flow of diplomatic information to what Wiio (1977) termed Private Communication (PC), Controlled (Mass) Communication (CC) and Directed (Mass) Communication (DC). In each of these communication modes, the foreign policy official controls message, audience or both. In a Mass Communication (MC) system (or mode), journalists determine

messages and target audiences. Thus, Mass Communication (open audience/open message) is dangerously unpredictable for diplomatic purposes and foreign policy officials will avoid it.

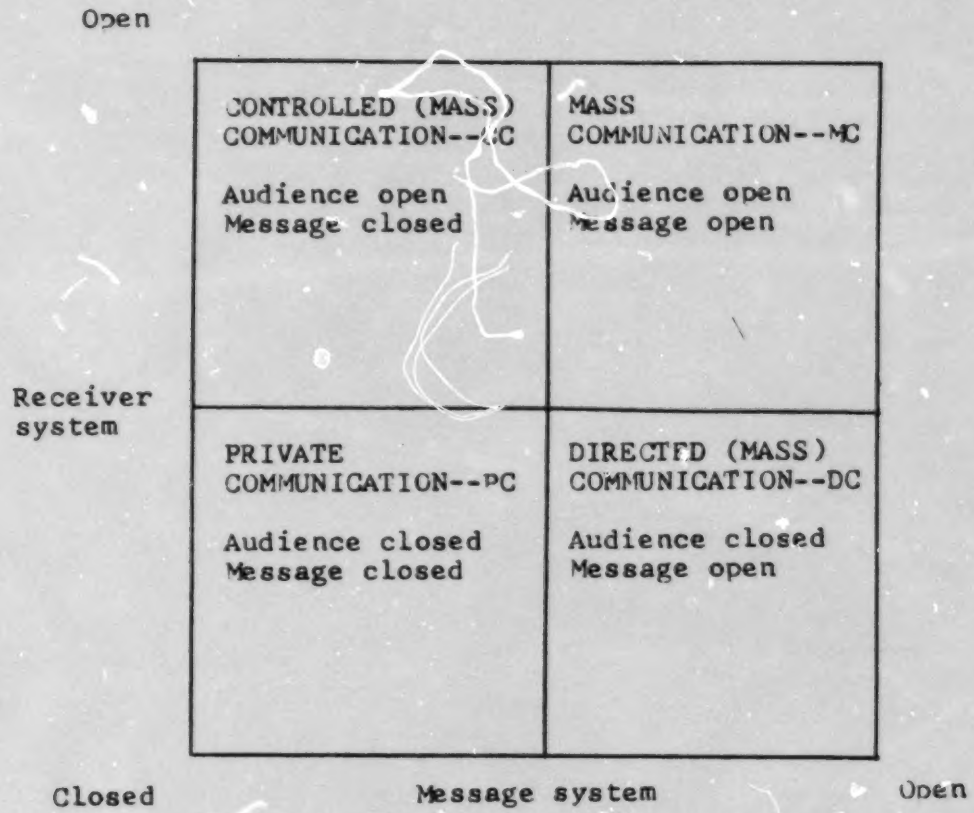

Figure 1: Open and closed mass media systems (see Wiio, 1977, p. 76)

Political System:

Siebert, Peterson & Schramm (1956) established the principle that "the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates" (p. 1). Accordingly, the press in more liberal-democratic societies will be relatively autonomous from government and

will profess some variant of the "fourth estate" ("adversary" or "watchdog") ideology. This press, according to Manning (1968), "is convinced that its primary enterprise is that of disclosure" (p. 149). Yet in the most democratic societies, officials will attempt to control diplomatic communications, safeguarding sensitive negotiations within PC channels and using CC and DC channels to conduct public diplomacy (i.e., influencing the diplomatic environment). Tensions arise between officials attempting to move diplomatic communication toward the lower-left of the matrix (Figure 1) and the news media working to move communications toward the upper right.

The more authoritarian the society, the fewer tensions are likely to emerge from the diplomacy-press relationship. In Siebert's (1956) authoritarian society, the news media are privately owned but avoid conflict with government. News media operate primarily in the CC mode. Wiio (1977) describes the latter:

> Controlled (mass) communication means a communication system where the audience system is as open as possible but the message system is relatively closed. The constraints of the message system may be political or any other type which limits the selection of messages (p. 76).

Diplomacy-press tensions in the authoritarian society are likely to occur only by accident in dealings between the diplomats and journalists of that society. Cases where the press misinterprets the government's version of the national interest, or where a maverick journalist exceeds normal bounds of criticism are rare and are quickly rectified. Tensions may be more common in the authoritarian society which grants relatively open access to foreign correspondents. Those from liberal societies are likely to behave as they would at home, pressing for disclosure and angering the host government in the process. As seen in recent years, foreign correspondents responsible for such tensions have suffered consequences ranging from harassment to imprisonment,

expulsion and sometimes fatal physical assault.

Totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China and some less developed countries represent a higher degree of authoritarianism. The mass media are owned and operated by the single political party or the state--a technical distinction. The press is an instrument of the state and journalists are its agents. News media fit the CC mode overall, with the message component strictly controlled. Domestic diplomacy-press tensions are unheard of and conflicts with the foreign press are minimized by controls on its physical access to the country and to news sources within it.

Openness of the Diplomatic Process:

Whether using secret or public diplomatic channels, foreign policy officials will attempt to control the communication process, avoiding the MC mode. In truly secret diplomacy, there is a minimal diplomacy-press relationship since the channel is PC and the press is theoretically ignorant of the content of the negotiations (perhaps of their very existence).

Diplomats may employ public diplomacy in lieu of, or to supplement, secret diplomacy. In either case, specific messages are aimed at specific receivers for specific purposes. Cohen (1963) identifies three types of "voluntary" information contribution by officials to the press, for "the exploitation of the press in the service of foreign policy" (p. 170). The first is by handout or press release, the second by background briefings and the third by "deliberate instrumental use of the press in order to achieve specific foreign policy objectives" (p. 171), i.e., "planting" or leaking specific policy messages for specific receivers in the news media. (The latter could include "disinformation" as well as factual messages.) All three are forms of public diplomacy and correspond to the CC and DC cells in Figure 1.

Public diplomacy uses the CC mode when the audience is open and the message is closed. An example of this is the public speech in which a foreign policy official inserts messages to officials in another country. The diplomatic messages are of marginal interest to the audience at hand, but the prominence of the official or the salience of the topic assures the speech news coverage and access to the intended receivers. Yet the speech audience and all news consumers also have access to the message. The message is closed in terms of its relevance, intelligibility or value. Manning (1968) writes, "A speech, one assumes, is supposed to communicate with the people it is delivered to, but in foreign affairs that may be its very least purpose" (p. 163).

The DC mode is used when the diplomatic purpose is served by a closed audience and an open message. The Voice of America operates this way, beaming its transmissions so that the U.S. public is excluded from its audience. International broadcasting can further close audiences by selecting variables such as language or hour of transmission. Trusted cadre in both the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China have access to digests of foreign press content that does not appear in their mass news media. An official in one country may grant an interview to the press of another country if he wishes to address a closed audience such as a foreign public. As long as information flow into his country is restricted, the audience remains closed. It is relatively difficult to conduct diplomatic communication in the DC mode when the source is in a "permeable" liberal-democratic society, however.

In rare cases, foreign policy officials might attempt to conduct diplomacy through the news media in the PC or MC modes. In the former case, there have been instances when individual journalists have agreed to serve as diplomatic emissaries when regular diplomatic envoys were denied access to their

counterparts. But the actual diplomatic messages were not channeled through the news media. "Conference diplomacy" has the trappings of diplomacy in the MC mode. This occurs when countries meet in large-scale bilateral or multilateral conferences, usually with open news media coverage of floor proceedings. Appearances are deceiving, however, because national positions are worked out privately in advance, and the most important conference politicking transpires away from press scrutiny.

Since, in the MC mode, both message and audience are determined by journalists, only a portion of the message may constitute diplomatic communication as defined above, i.e., purposive communication by officials.

Journalistic Roles:

In their relations with foreign policy officials, journalists can play two roles. Cohen (1963) defined these as "neutral reporter" (p. 22 ff.) and "participant" (p. 31 ff.). The neutral reporter informs and interprets, but fundamentally offers an accurate reflection of the government version of the situation. The participant reporter, on the other hand, is more active and autonomous, representing the public's "right to know," criticizing government, advocating proposed policies or formulating and promoting the press's own policy proposals. Except as advocate of government policies, the participant role for the press is rare in authoritarian societies. Any press coverage, however, has some impact on diplomacy, the more so if it comes to the attention of officials in other countries. Manning (1968) notes that, "It is usually not possible to describe a diplomatic situation publicly, however accurately, without changing it and making it different; the public comment becomes part of the situation" (p. 155).

The journalist's central role is determined, above all, by the ambient

political system. Secondary determinants are related to the complex of socioprofessional factors Roshco (1975), Sigal (1973), Tuchman (1978) and others have described in reporter-source relations. Diplomats, as noted earlier, tend to share a common culture regardless of nationality. On the other hand, the press's native political culture shapes its professional ideology that ultimately defines it as watchdog or lapdog of government.

The more authoritarian the political environment, the more neutral and the less flexible the press's role in diplomatic communication. The press in the authoritarian society respects the confidentiality of the diplomatic process and more or less willingly serves as passive instrument of official public diplomacy, i.e., propaganda. It finds its own voice only to echo and amplify government policy. For this very reason, however, it provides valuable insights for foreign policy officials abroad. Since its role places it in the FC and DC modes, its content is always assumed to be purposive and official. Press content in liberal societies is considerably more noise-ridden and ambiguous as a public diplomacy channel, however. There is not always a clear distinction between official messages and those independently formulated by the press itself. In any event, it seems safe to assume that the more tenuous diplomatic relations between two countries, the more each country's foreign policy officials will attend to the other's news media as an indirect channel for diplomatic relations. It is hard to imagine the total absence of some form of diplomatic communication between two states.

Conclusions:

The growing acceptance of the concept of public diplomacy has made the news media of the world actors on the foreign policy scene. There are a number of roles both journalists and diplomats can play and which constitute the four

communication systems Wiio (1977) identifies. The more authoritarian the society, the more compatible or complementary are press and diplomacy, and the more the press serves as a policy instrument. Foreign policy officials in both authoritarian and liberal societies have a professional tendency to close or control even "public" diplomatic communication. In liberal societies, the press's "fourth estate" ideology encourages disclosure and fosters constant tensions between the press and the foreign policy establishment.

There is a major gap in international mass communication and foreign relations research regarding the role of the press in diplomatic communication. Cohen (1963) remarks that:

> If the newspaper were really only a mechanical purveyor of factual information, then its omission from theories of foreign policy-making would make little difference. But if foreign policy news is itself a product of all these (neutral or participant journalistic) roles, then any dependence on such news for an understanding of the larger world means that the correspondents are authentic participants in the politics of foreign policy-making, and thus the newspaper in all its aspects needs to be brought into our theories concerning foreign policy (p. 46). (Author's parentheses.)

Except for extending Cohen's (1963) proposed focus to all mass news media, his recommendations are as valid today as two decades ago, because this research area remains relatively neglected.

There are numerous methodological obstacles to the systematic scholarly examination of mass news media as diplomatic communicators, in large part related to the confidentiality of the diplomatic process. Sources may be veiled, messages ambiguous and effects diffused. Variables may not lend themselves to quantifiable operationalization. Within the tradition of political and organizational communication theories, however, tools such as content analysis and survey research appear promising.

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